Rebati

But oft some shining April morn
Is darkened in an hour,
And blackest griefs o'er joyous home,
Alas! unseen may lower.

Rev. J. H. Gurney

Rebati! Rebi! You fire, you ashes!'

Patapur — a sleepy little village in Hariharpur subdivision in the district of Cuttack. At one end stood Shyambandhu Mohanty's house: two rows of rooms, front and back, with an inner courtyard centring around a well, and a shed for husking rice with a vegetable patch behind the house and a garden in front. It was in the outer room that visitors and farmers wanting to pay their taxes congregated and made themselves comfortable. Shyambandhu Mohanty, the zamindar's accountant, was responsible for collecting taxes. His salary was two rupees a month, but he could earn a little more by adjusting rent receipts and land records; all told, he made at least four rupees. With this he could make ends meet. And not just barely; no, to tell the truth, he was quite comfortable. His family never complained of wanting for anything. They had all they needed: two drumstick trees in the backyard, and a patch of land always full of greens and vegetables; two cows, which never went dry at the same time, so there was

always a little curd and milk in the pails. Mohanty's old mother made fuel cakes from cow dung and husks, so they rarely had to buy firewood. The zamindar had given him three and a half acres of rent-free land to cultivate, and it produced just about enough to meet their needs.

Shyambandhu was a straightforward person, and the tenants respected, even liked, him. He went from door to door cajoling and coaxing them to pay their taxes; he never demanded a paisa extra from anyone. On his own initiative and without their asking him to, he would slip four-finger-wide palmleaf receipts into the underside thatch of their houses. He never let the zamindar's muscleman cast his shadow over the village; he'd pump the fellow's palm, fondle his chin and tuck two paise into the folds of his dhoti to buy a plug of tobacco and see him off.

In his own home, Shyambandhu had four stomachs to fill – his own, his wife's, his old mother's and his ten-year-old daughter's. The daughter's name was Rebati. In the evenings Shyambandhu would sit on his verandah and sing Krupasindhu Badan and other prayer songs; at times he would light an oil lamp, place it on a wooden stand and read aloud passages from the Bhagavat. Rebati always sat next to him, listening with rapt attention; soon she had learnt a few by heart. Her melodious voice lent the songs more appeal, and people would stop by

to listen to her. There was one hymn which gave Shyambandhu the greatest joy, and every evening he would unfailingly ask Rebati to sing it:

Whither shall I take my prayers, Lord,
If *thou* turnest a blind eye?
Surely shall I be finished.
Be it salvation or damnation,
To *thee* this life a dedication,
To *thee*, this soul laden.
Empty, empty, all the three worlds
When I am without *thee*.
True refreshment when I thirst
Only *thy* love can be.

Two years previously, in the course of his visit to the countryside, the deputy inspector of schools had happened to spend a night at Patapur. At the request of the village elders he had written to the inspector of schools, Orissa Division, and an upper primary school had been established in the village. The government paid the teacher's salary of four rupees a month, to which was added each student's contribution of an anna.

The teacher, Basudev, a young man of twenty, had attended the teachers training course at Cuttack Normal School. Urbane and polite, he never took on superior airs. He had been orphaned at an early age and had

been brought up by his uncle. True to his name, he was a fine human being. Charming and handsome — the indelible mark of a bottle's mouth on his forehead applied by his mother to treat diphtheria during childhood enhanced rather than marred his looks. He seemed to have been sculpted out of a single block.

From the time he arrived in the village, Shyambandhu had taken a fancy to him: they both belonged to the same caste.

Occasionally, on a full moon day or a Thursday, when cakes and savouries were made at home, Shyambandhu would call at the school: 'Son, Basu, come to our place this evening; your auntie has invited you.' A bond of affection had naturally developed between them after these visits. Even Rebati's mother, filled with concern, would sometimes exclaim: 'Ah, the poor little orphan! What does he eat, who looks after his meals?' As the visits became regular, with Basu dropping in practically every evening, Rebati would wait at the door to announce his arrival. As soon as she spotted him at a distance she would call out to her father, 'Here comes Basubhai, here he comes!' Then she would sit beside him and sing all the prayer songs she knew. To Basu's ears, the songs were fresh and ever new.

One day, as they chatted about this and that, Shyam

bandhu learnt from Basu that there was a school at Cuttack where girls could study and also learn crafts; instantly, the desire to give Rebati an education welled up in his heart. When he confided this to Basu, the young teacher, who had already begun to look upon him as a father, said: 'I was about to suggest that myself.'

Rebati listened to the conversation and rushed inside. 'I'm going to study,' she announced excitedly to her mother and grandmother. 'I'm going to learn to read.'

Her mother smiled. 'Go ahead,' she said, but her grandmother's reaction was sharp: 'What good will it do you? How does book-learning help a girl? It's enough to know how to cook, bake, churn butter and decorate walls with rice-paste.'

That night, when Shyambandhu sat down to dinner on a low wooden stool with Rebati beside him, the old lady sat opposite them, restive and itching to speak her mind: 'Serve him a little more rice, daughter-in-law, give him a second helping of dal and a pinch of salt,' and so on. Then she brought up the topic: 'Shyam, is Rebi going to study? Why should she study, son? What good is that for a girl?'

'Never mind, Ma,' said Shyambandhu. 'Let her study if she wants to. Haven't you heard that Jhankar Pattanaik's daughters can read the Bhagavat and Vaidehisa Vilas?'

Rebati was furious at her grandmother. 'You silly old fool!' she snorted. Turning to her father, she begged him, 'Father, I do want to study.'

'And so you will,' said Shyambandhu.

The matter was left there.

The following afternoon Basu brought Rebati a copy of Sitanath Babu's *First Lessons*. She was so overjoyed that she leafed through the book from cover to cover. The pictures of elephants, houses and cows thrilled her no end. Kings could be happy to own elephants and horses, others perhaps derived joy from riding them, but for Rebati it was enough merely to gaze at their pictures. She could hardly wait to show them to her mother and grandmother.

The grandmother did not hide her irritation. 'Take that silly thing away from me,' she shouted.

'Silly you!' the girl retorted.

The auspicious day of Sri Panchami dawned. Rebati took an early bath, put on new clothes and flitted in and out of the house, waiting impatiently for Basu. The usual pomp associated with this occasion for beginning learning was played down out of fear of the grandmother. Six hours into the morning Basu arrived and taught her the alphabet: *a, aa, e, ee, u, oo . . .*

The lessons went on. Basu never missed a day. Over

the next two years Rebati studied a great deal. All the rhymes of Madhu Rao were on the tip of her tongue and she could reel them off without faltering.

At dinner one night, Shyambandhu said to his mother, as if to round off a discussion they had been having, 'Well, Ma, what do you think?'

'Nothing could be better,' said the old lady. 'But are you certain what his caste is?'

'That's what I was trying to find out. He may be poor but he comes from a good family. And he's a pucca Karan to boot.'

'Good. Caste counts more than wealth. But will he agree to live with us?'

'Why not? After all, his only relatives are his uncle and aunt. He probably won't insist on living with them.'

What Rebati made of all this she alone knew, but a change certainly came over her. She became noticeably coy with Basu. In the evening she would hang around the front door, as though waiting for someone, which riled her grandmother no end, but when Basu arrived, she would hide inside the house. It took Basu quite an effort before she would come out for her studies. Blushing and smiling for no apparent reason, she would refuse to read her lessons aloud and would answer him in monosyllables. As soon as the day's lesson was done

she would rush inside, struggling to muffle her giggles.

One Sri Panchami followed another, and two years passed. Providence's designs are strange and inscrutable; no two days are alike. One fine Phalgun day, like a bolt out of the blue, a cholera epidemic struck.

Early in the morning the news of Shyambandhu coming down with cholera spread through the village. As always, the immediate response was to bolt the doors and windows and keep out of the path of the demonic deity, as though the evil old hag was out with her basket and broom sweeping up heads.

Shyambandhu's wife and mother were soon driven out of their minds by worry and anxiety. Rebati ran in and out of the house, crying for help. When the news reached Basu, he hurried from the school and, without fear for his own life, sat at the bedside, massaging Shyambandhu's hands and legs and forcing drops of water between his parched lips.

Three hours passed.

Suddenly, Shyambandhu looked up at Basu and stammered: 'Take care of my family, I leave them to you . . .'

Basu could not hold back his tears.

Shyambandhu passed away that evening.

The women wailed. Rebati rolled on the floor.

How could the two grief-stricken women and the inexperienced Basu make arrangements for cremation? Bana Sethi, the village washerman, a veteran of fifty or sixty cremations, saved the day turning up with a towel wrapped around his waist and an axe resting on his shoulder. Bana was rather philosophical about it: cholera or no cholera, if your time's up you've got to go, whether today or tomorrow, but why miss out on a set of new clothes? Shyambandhu's was the only Karan family in the village, and help was neither expected nor forthcoming; the two women and Basudev had to carry the body to the cremation ground and perform the last rites.

The morning star was shining in the eastern sky by the time they were done. No sooner had they got home than Rebati's mother came down with cholera. By midday the news of her death was all over the village.

Providence works in mysterious ways — while one man is blessed with a regal umbrella atop his palanquin, another receives lashes on his already fettered hands. Within three months of Shyambandhu's demise, the zamindar expropriated Shyambandhu's cows — apparently he had not deposited the last tax collection. This was hard to believe, however. Shyambandhu had always regarded depositing the money as sacred and would not rest in peace until every paise of the collection

was in the zamindar's treasury. The truth was that for a long time the zamindar had had his eyes on the cows. He also took back the three and a half acres he had given Shyambandhu. There was no work for the farm-hand, and he left on the full moon day of Dola festival. The team of bullocks had already been sold off for seventeen and a half rupees; with what remained of the sum after the funeral expenses, the grandmother and Rebati hung on for a month. In the month following they had begun to pawn household items — a brass bowl one day, a plate the next.

Basu visited them every evening and stayed with them until bedtime. He offered them money, but they would not touch it. Once or twice he pressed some on them, but the coins lay idle on the shelf. He had no choice but to accept the couple of paise the old woman produced every eight or ten days to buy them provisions. The house was falling apart, the straw roof had worn thin, but try as he might Basu couldn't get it re-thatched; the bales of hay he bought with two rupees of his own money rotted in the backyard.

The grandmother no longer cried day and night; she now confined her wailing to the evenings. But she put so much of herself into it that it left her slumped in a heap on the floor for the night. Rebati, convulsing in sobs, would lie down next to her. The old woman's vision

had declined and she had a wild look about her. She no longer cried as much and took to heaping curses and abuse on Rebati: the wretched girl was at the root of all her misery and misfortune; her education had caused it all — first her son had died, then her daughter-in-law; the bullocks had been sold off; the farm-hand had left; the cows had been taken back by the zamindar; and now her eyes had gone bad. Rebati was the evil-eye, the hell-devil, the ill omen.

The moment the curses started coming thick and fast, Rebati would shrink away from her grandmother and hide in a corner of the house or the backyard, tears streaming down her cheeks.

The grandmother held Basu equally to blame. Were it not for his eagerness to teach the girl, she could not possibly have gone and taught herself! But the grandmother could not take Basu to task because she couldn't do without him. The zamindar kept seeking flimsy clarifications, and almost every second day a messenger came asking for this account or that. Basu alone could fish them out from the clutter of papers Shyambandhu had left behind. Yet, behind Basu's back, the old woman sometimes gave vent to her feelings.

Rebati presence no longer filled the house; gone were the days when she would be heard mourning loudly.

Nobody heard her voice, nobody saw her out of doors. Her large brooding eyes, awash with silent tears, looked like blue lilies set in water. Her heart and mind broken, day and night were alike to her. The sun brought her no light, the night no darkness; the world was an aching void. The thoughts of her parents overwhelmed her, their faces hung before her glazed eyes. She could not bring herself to believe that they were truly dead and gone. Hunger no longer stirred her stomach; slumber no longer closed her eyes. She went through the pretence of eating only out of fear of her grandmother; thin and emaciated, her skin hung loose on her bones, and she could barely raise herself off the floor where she lay day and night. The only time she revived a little was when Basu visited them. She would sit up and fasten her gaze on him, lowering her eyes with a sigh when their glances met. But the next moment she'd feverishly stare at him again. For those brief hours of the day when he was around, Basu completely possessed her eyes, her mind and her heart.

Roughly five months had passed. On a hot Jaistha Saturday afternoon, Basu knocked on their door. Never before had he ever called at such an unusual hour. The old woman was full of foreboding as she opened the door.

'Grandma,' said Basu. 'The deputy inspector of schools will camp at the Hariharpur police station and be giving students an oral test. All the schools have been informed; I received the order today. Tomorrow morning I'll have to start off and may be away for five days.'

Listening to the conversation from behind the door, Rebati felt her legs give way. She could barely hold on to the door tightly enough to stop herself from falling.

Basu bought them enough rice, oil, salt and vegetables for five days, and bade them good bye.

'Son,' said the old woman with a sigh. 'Don't walk about in the sun for long. Take care of yourself; eat your meals on time.'

Rebati could not take her eyes off him. Before, she would look away when their eyes met, but today she stared unblinkingly, unabashedly into his eyes. A change seemed to have come over Basu too. For a long time he had contented himself with stolen glances, but today he did not turn away. They stared deeply into each other's eyes.

Evening came; darkness filled the house and covered the earth. Rebati remained rooted to the ground until her grandmother's piercing screams jolted her to her senses. Basu had left a long time before.

Rebati counted the days.

On the sixth morning she even rushed a couple of times to the front door, a place she had shunned since her parents' death. Six hours had passed when the schoolboys arrived back from Hariharpur, bringing the news of Basu's death. He had succumbed to cholera under the big banyan tree on the outskirts of Gopalpur on his return journey. The village folks mourned; the women and children shed copious tears. 'What a handsome fellow!' said one. 'So polite,' said another. 'Never hurt a fly,' remarked yet another.

The grandmother cried so much that she choked. 'Poor boy!' she repeated between sobs. 'You only brought it on yourself!' The implication was that it was because of his foolishness in wanting to teach Rebati that he had perished in his prime.

Rebati sank to the floor and lay there without a whine or a whimper.

The grandmother woke up the following morning without Rebati beside her and shouted out in anger: 'Rebati! Rebi! You fire, you ashes!' She worked herself into a froth, and the passers-by heard these terrible words repeated all morning long.

Half-blind and angry, she groped her way through the entire house. When she finally found the girl, a shock awaited her. Rebati, burning with fever, was unconscious. Worry and fear gnawed at the old woman's heart. She

couldn't decide what to do, who to turn to for help. Exasperated, out of breath, and without hope, she tartly commented: 'What medicine can there be for an illness of one's own making!' Rebati had brought the fever on herself by daring to study.

One, two, three, four, five days passed. Rebati remained glued to the ground, her eyes and lips shut. On the sixth morning she let out a whimper or two. The old woman ran her hand over the girl's body. It was cool to the touch; perhaps the fever had left. She called out to her, and Rebati mumbled a reply, then asked for water, stared wildly around and broke into incoherent babble. One quick look and even a country doctor could have quoted from his text: 'Thirst, fever, delirium; of imminent collapse these are the symptoms.' But the poor grandmother was overcome with a sense of relief. The fever had left, the girl was able to open her eyes and speak two words to ask for water. A little gruel was all she needed to regain her strength and get back on her feet.

'Don't get up,' the grandmother said. 'Stay where you are. I'm going to cook you a bit of food.' She left the room and rummaged in vain among the earthen pots for a handful of rice. Her head became clouded with despair and she sat down with a sigh. If only her eyesight

had been better she would have realized that the provisions meant for five days had already lasted for ten.

But there was a flicker of hope in her yet. She picked up the only object of value left in the house — an old brass bowl with a hole in the bottom — and set out for Hari Sa's store. The so-called store was in Hari's residence, in the middle of the village, and he kept a paltry stock of rice, salt, cereals and oil to sell to travellers passing by.

Hari saw the old woman with the bowl. He understood immediately, but let her plead first. He then took the bowl and examined it minutely, turning it from side to side. 'There's no rice,' he said, handing it back. 'Who's going to give you anything for a bowl like this?' Of course he had both the rice and the inclination to sell it, but getting the brass bowl for a song was utmost in his mind. The grandmother staggered at his words, as though lightning had hit her. What would she do if she didn't get any rice, what would she cook for Rebati, how would the girl fight her weakness? She sat there for hours, depressed and silent, still as a log, casting imploring glances at the shopkeeper.

The day wore on. Realising she had left the sick girl alone for a long time, fear stirred her old heart. 'Time I got back home,' she mumbled to herself, picking up the

bowl. 'God knows how that girl of mine is doing.'

'Never mind,' said Hari grudgingly. 'Give me the bowl. Let's see if I can scrape up a little something for you.' He gave her four measures of rice, half a measure of cereals and a handful of salt. The old woman hobbled back home, resting every four steps or so to catch her breath. She hadn't even washed her face since morning, and her mind was in a whirl.

She reached home hoping that Rebati was better. She thought she'd ask the girl to draw water from the well. The rice wouldn't take long to cook. She called out to Rebati once, twice, three times, but got no response. Then she yelled at the top of her voice: 'Rebati! Rebi! You fire, you ashes!'

By now Rebati was sinking fast. Her body, already feeble from spasms of excruciating pain, had turned ice-cold. Her thirst was so terrible that she felt as if her tongue was being sucked back into her throat. She found the room unbearably hot and crawled out to the inner courtyard. Even that brought no relief. She rolled out to the verandah at the back and propped herself up against the wall.

Dusk had fallen and a gentle breeze was blowing. A bunch of bananas hung from the plant which her father had planted before his death. The guava her mother

had planted two years ago had grown to a goodly height and was covered with blossoms. Rebati remembered how she had drawn water from the well in a small jug and tended the sapling. It brought back a rush of memories of her mother. Her head was in a whirl, her thoughts jumbled, but the image of her mother clung to her.

Night slowly descended. Darkness stole out from the boughs of the trees and shrouded the garden. Rebati tilted her head back and watched the sky. The lone evening star was gleaming brightly. She could not take her eyes off it; and it grew and grew and grew, bigger and brighter; it invaded the whole sky, and behold! Her loving mother sat in the heart of it, her face glowing with love and kindness, her arms extended towards Rebati in invitation. Rebati was overwhelmed. Two shafts of light pierced her eyes and moved down to her heart. Her breathing, heavy and laboured, rose and fell, breaking the stillness of the night. She wheezed, choked and cried out to her mother twice. Then there was silence.

The grandmother crawled around the house, going from the living room to the courtyard to the rice-husking shed, but Rebati was nowhere to be found. Then it occurred to the old woman that with the fever abating the girl might be taking a stroll in the garden at the

back. ‘Rebati!’ she screamed. ‘Rebi! You fire, you ashes!’

She crawled out to the narrow verandah, which was only one hand wide and two high, and bumped into the girl. ‘Death to you!’ she cried. ‘Sitting here, are you?’ She wanted to shake her up, but she could sense something was amiss.

She ran her hand over the length of the girl’s body and then held a finger close to her nostrils. The night’s silence was rent by her eerie wail. Two bodies fell from the verandah and thudded to the ground.

That was the end of Shyambandhu Mohanty’s family.

The last words which had emanated from his house were: ‘Rebati! Rebi! You fire, you ashes!’

(1898)